

A touch of neoclassicism

Vicky Coltman

Last spring, three major exhibitions in London were devoted to aspects of neoclassicism in Britain. Sculpture took pride of place at Tate Britain's *The Return of the Gods*, architecture at Sir John Soane's Museum's *In Pursuit of Antiquity*, and the decorative arts at the Victoria & Albert Museum's exploration of *Thomas Hope: Regency Designer*. Art historian Vicky Coltman went to the Tate exhibition and asks: what is 'neoclassicism', and why should anyone be interested in neoclassical sculpture?

Living softness

The Return of the Gods invaded the monumental central galleries at Tate Britain with a mania for marble. The usually well-lit spaces with their neutral colour palette were transformed by dramatic spotlights which brilliantly illuminated the marble sculptures positioned in front of dark, cavernous walls. The impression was of a nocturnal encounter. Visiting sculpture galleries at night was a favoured pastime of visitors to Rome in the later eighteenth century, who were often accompanied by a guide (ideally a sculptor) to the Vatican and Capitoline Museums. By flickering torchlight, the ancient masterpieces in Roman collections could be viewed in a new light which brought the figurative sculptures alive. This impression of animation was sometimes heightened by the use of rotating pedestals, which gave this most impenetrable of artistic materials the possibility of circular motion.

The Tate assembled a wide range of neoclassical sculptures, some of them freestanding – from colossal male forms to petite, curvy Venuses, to four-year-old girls – some of them portrait busts, and others again reliefs. Crowning the vista at the end of the tunnel-like gallery was Antonio Canova's celebrated trio *The Three Graces* 1814–17. Once displayed in a tailor-made temple of the Graces in the sculpture gallery at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, the *Three Graces* was bought by the National Galleries of Scotland and the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1994 for the staggering sum of £7,600,000. The base is still fitted with the brass knobs by which the sculpture could be rotated. Sadly the Graces now remain unmoved by our attention. And we can't touch them either, though that was a vital part of the aesthetic experience of sculpture in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. The first owner of the Graces, the 6th Duke of Bedford, wrote of their 'look of living softness given to the surface of the marble, which appears as if it would yield to the touch'.

Roman roots

The label 'neoclassicism' was coined only later by the Victorians and used as a term of abuse for what they saw as a lifeless and impersonal style that attempted (and in the eyes of the Victorians, failed) to revive the antique. Today it is used of work produced during the sixty-year period from 1770 to 1830 by sculptors who used the Greek and Roman past as a library, or repertoire of subjects, themes, and characters, for their own productions. Over half the sculptures in the Tate exhibition were produced when their makers were in Rome learning their trade. A British painter wrote that it was not painting but sculpture 'that is the great object of attention and encouragement' in Rome in 1826.

Those sculptures in the exhibition that were not made by British sculptors were commissioned or bought from their continental peers by British patrons on their grand tours in Italy.

Sculptures were commissioned or purchased as luxury collectables, imported from Rome to Britain for display in the country house interior. John Rossi's *The British Athlete*, 1828, is still in the sculpture gallery at Petworth House in Sussex for which it was commissioned by the 3rd Earl of Egremont. A work by Thomas Banks, *Thetis dipping Achilles in the Styx*, c. 1786, reveals the link between neoclassical sculptures as elite possessions evoking and invoking antiquity and their potential for contemporary self-representation. In this ambitious work Banks shows Thetis dangling her son precariously by his heel in the River Styx;

the head of Thetis is a portrait of Jane Johnes, wife of the man who commissioned the sculpture, and the infant Achilles has the features of their baby daughter Marianne.

Sculpting and sculpted celebrities

The Venetian Antonio Canova is undoubtedly the most celebrated of neoclassical sculptors, both in his lifetime and up to the present day. But other neoclassical sculptors too, such as the Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen, acquired enormous international reputations. Today many are unknown or famed for one particular work – like the American Hiram Powers, responsible for *The Greek Slave* (left), uniting chains with female nudity and classical form with contemporary politics, or John Gibson, responsible for an experiment in colouring marble known as *The Tinted Venus* (right).

One of the valuable things done by the Tate exhibition was to show how neoclassicism continued beyond 1830, juxtaposing earlier and later pieces. Gibson's *Narcissus*, 1838, perched on a rock and captivated by his own (unseen) reflection, shares a plinth with Joseph Nollekens' seated *Mercury*, 1783, opposite Gibson's *Pandora*, 1856 and Canova's *Psyche*, 1789–93. Nollekens' *Mercury* explicitly invokes a celebrated bronze sculpture recently excavated in the eighteenth century at the site of Herculaneum. Other works in the exhibition referenced 'antiquity' in a variety of ways, not least by taking subjects from classical literature and mythology, exploiting literary texts from Homer's *Iliad* to Apuleius' *Golden Ass* or picking up on themes from ancient history.

Portrait busts were a neoclassical favourite. These truncated heads without bodies were incredibly popular in the neoclassical period. To our twenty-first century eyes they seem bland and not at all naturalistic; all too easy to walk past without a second glance. Once you scrutinize them, however, it soon becomes apparent that they are highly individualistic with distinctive hair, dress, and expressions: with wigs, or bare-headed, with formal and informal hints of dress or nakedness; their heads poised at angles catching our eye, or looking into the far

distance. Some of the faces show signs of wear and tear – reminding us that not all neoclassical sculpture is idealizing – with wrinkles, sagging flesh, and bags under their eyes.

Just how important material is to these busts is revealed by a bust by Francis Harwood of a black athlete executed in black stone (*pietra da paragone*), outstanding amid the profusion of white marble (right). Nothing is known about the sitter or the commission, so this remains an enigmatic sculpture that eludes the usual interrogation by art historians with their questions: who are you? Who made you? Where were you displayed?

The lure of the third dimension

Sculptures may be mute and unable to answer all our questions, but they nevertheless shout out the continued vitality of antiquity in the modern period. Walking around an exhibition of neoclassical sculpture reveals how important the third dimension is to its appeal. To walk around a figure is to encounter it as truly human. With so many beautiful bottoms on display in a gallery one comes to understand those stories told by Pliny, Ovid, and Lucian about people embracing and kissing sculptures, falling in love with statues and bringing them to life through their desires. The third dimension is the dimension of passion. Perhaps it is a good job we are not allowed to touch!

Vicky Coltman teaches the History of Art at Edinburgh University. Like the sculptors she discusses here, she has lately been spending her time in Rome on research leave.